



Key elements of collaboration

Despite its established value, collaboration remains difficult to define and achieve. A review of the literature identifies three elements that are key to successful collaboration: the interaction process, governance structures and systems and processes¹.

INTERACTION PROCESS

Collaboration is a means of producing something joined and new, from the interactions of people or organisations, their knowledge and resources. These interactions are facilitated by relationships—the personal bonds or ‘connections’—that are established and maintained by the people and organisations participating in the collaboration. Relationships give collaboration strength, allowing it to form and function effectively. The quality of those relationships is determined by three primary factors: trust, reciprocity and mutuality.

Trust has been described as a lubricant to collaborative action because it reduces complexity and the costs of exchanges between members of the collaboration. A higher level of trust leads to more information and resource sharing and a willingness to commit to joint and potentially risky efforts to achieve outcomes.

There are several types of trust that relate to collaborative processes:

The Advancing Collaboration Practice program has been established to support ARACY’s work building cross-sector collaborations capable of implementing action that addresses the complex problems impacting the wellbeing of children and young people in Australia. The program builds stakeholder capabilities to establish and manage long-term joint working relationships and collaborative efforts. **For more information please contact ARACY on 08 9476 7800**

- companion trust: resulting from goodwill and friendship and based on benevolence and association
- competence trust: having confidence in the capacity of others to fulfil agreed tasks
- commitment trust: derived from contractual or other enforceable cross-institutional agreements.

However, it is argued that trust generated from shared values, language and vision is most essential in building commitment to a collaboration and its goals. This type of trust is required for participants to ‘step back and let go’ of control of their own agendas and to accept and give up control of the collaboration’s new, shared agenda to the collective. This willingness to share power, and to trust others not to take advantage of it, cannot be overestimated.

Developing trust takes time and investment up front as well as throughout the collaborative process. Trust must be nurtured, worked on and revisited to keep it going. This requires regular, preferably personal, contact, dialogue and quality monitoring to be established and maintained² as part of the collaboration’s usual practices and joint activities.

- 1 Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge, UK. Keast, R., Brown, K., Mandell, M. and Woolcock, G. (2004). Network Structures: Working differently and changing expectations. *Public Administration Review* 64 (3): 363–371. Thompson, A., Perry, J. and Miller, T. (2009). Conceptualising and measuring collaboration. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 19 (1): 23–56.
- 2 Powell, W. (1996). Trust based forms of governance. In R. Kramer and T. Tyler (eds). *Trust in organizations*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA: pp.51–67.

Reciprocity is a loose process of give and take in which members can expect a return of equal value on their contribution. There is a 'generalised' expectation that everyone gives freely to others, knowing that they will be recipients as often as givers³. Effective collaboration requires participants to shift from a self-interested and cautious approach ('I will if you do') to a longer-term, more collective and established practice of reciprocity. Often the breakthrough for collaboration comes from the simple act of one partner taking a risk and putting something onto the table and others following. Underpinning both trust and reciprocity is reputation. Reputation refers to the overall estimation of the character or quality of an individual or a group. Reputation is a key consideration when selecting or agreeing to participants in a collaboration, and establishes their roles within the collaboration. Behaviours that help participants form a good reputation as a collaborator are:

- complying with established practices for collective action
- helping to identify or define shared problems and devise solutions
- promoting mutual rather than self-interested outcomes.

Mutuality occurs when members agree to replace independent interests with collective interests and activities. In collaborations, mutuality grows from the participants' shared beliefs and/or common purpose, and their acknowledgement that they are interdependent and therefore rely on each other to achieve their jointly agreed or collective goals. Forming and sustaining collaboration requires each participant to adopt the shared vision, change their ways of working and commit to achieving collective as well as individual goals.

Strong and productive relationships between participants—based on trust, reciprocity and mutuality—are essential for successful collaborations. Research has highlighted a tendency for collaborations to focus on established relationships and overlook the potential contribution of new participants. While valuing and nurturing existing relationships, it is also important to

identify resource gaps and potential participants who share, and could help achieve, the collaboration's goals.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Collaboration requires governance structures that enable participants to work together most effectively: to negotiate and decide how to solve collective problems, and jointly set their own working rules and procedures for involvement, decision making and contributions. In general, too loose a structure hampers cohesive action while too heavy stifles participation, initiative and innovation. So the emphasis is on having the minimal structure and rules necessary to do the work while allowing participants the space to interact and be dynamic.

SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

Although we often think of collaborative efforts as discrete activities, the reality is that participants are part of a broader system of organisations and/or groups. This system operates very differently from the way collaborative efforts need to operate. Therefore the organisations and/or groups in this broader system will have to make adjustments to accommodate the operations of collaborative networks, such as:

- establishing flexible recruitment and hiring processes that encourage cross-boundary working
- changing organisational norms and culture to support collaboration, in particular gearing reward systems toward collaboration
- including the requirement for collaborative behaviour in job descriptions, setting goals related to cross-boundary work, and acknowledging those who exhibit collaborative behaviours
- introducing arrangements that facilitate the work of the collaboration—for example, open access to funding and resource supports
- developing accountability and reporting regimes that reflect shared effort and responsibility, including performance indicators for collaborative behaviour and actions, the formation of shared revenue streams and establishing agreed reporting criteria.

³ Thompson, A., Perry, J., Miller, T. (2009). Conceptualising and measuring collaboration. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 19 (1): 23–56.

These system-wide changes will be needed to legitimise and sustain the efforts of individuals working in collaborative networks.

Formation of collaboration necessitates changes within and among participating organisations including:

- shifting emphasis from completing tasks to building and nurturing the relationships needed to facilitate joint work;
- altering the structure and operation of the participating groups to reflect collaborative ideas; and
- encouraging shared decision making.

Finally, it should be remembered that any collaboration is as complex as the issues that it deals with; there is no one-size-fits-all model. Instead, successful collaboration rests on the ability of members and administrators to be aware of the key elements of collaboration provided here as a basis for responses that best fit their problem context.

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

ARACY is a national non-profit organisation working to create better futures for all Australia's children and young people. Despite Australia being a wealthy, developed country, many aspects of the health and wellbeing of our young people have been declining. ARACY was formed to reverse these trends, by preventing and addressing the major problems affecting our children and young people. ARACY tackles these complex issues through building collaborations with researchers, policy makers and practitioners from a broad range of disciplines. We share knowledge and foster evidence-based solutions.

About the authors of this fact sheet

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